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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR AF/E, A/S CARSON AND PRM

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SUBJECT: SOMALIA - DADAAB REFUGEES' VIEWS ON U.S. POLICY

Summary

¶1. (SBU) The residents of Kenya's Dadaab refugee camp, home to more than 270,000 mostly Somali refugees, espoused a wide range of both positive and negative views on the U.S. government's involvement in Somalia. In general, most were grateful for U.S. aid to the camp, but many felt the United States was at least partially responsible for the turmoil in Somalia, and believed the United States could, given political will, quickly neutralize the extremists who continue to impede Somalia's progress toward peace and stability. The refugees' views on Somalia's future and opportunities for U.S. engagement with the refugees will be discussed in septels. End summary.

Population is Triple
Planned Capacity

¶2. (SBU) A Somalia Unit officer, accompanied by a visiting AF/PDPA officer, traveled to Dadaab refugee camp from May 11-13 to survey the views of the refugees regarding U.S. policy toward Somalia, the current and future political prospects for Somalia, and opportunities for public diplomacy engagement with the refugees. The Dadaab refugee camp is in fact three separate camps - Ifo, Dagahaley, and Hagadera - and is located approximately 80 kilometers from the border with Somalia in Kenya's Northeast Province. The camp was created in 1991 with capacity for 90,000 refugees. The camp currently houses over 270,000 registered refugees, with more arriving daily in spite of the official closure of the Kenya-Somalia border.

Surprise at U.S. Focus
on Somalia

¶3. (SBU) Many refugee groups with whom we spoke were unaware of the existence of the Somalia Unit in Nairobi, and expressed surprise and pleasure that the Department of State had personnel dedicated to diplomatic relations with Somalia. A community leader in Hagadera said the creation of the Somalia Unit "symbolizes great progress" in U.S. involvement in Somalia. Many of the refugees were very appreciative of the visit, noting that our effort to interact with them symbolized our recognition of the refugees' importance in the present and future well-being of their country. A female community leader in Ifo claimed no one had ever asked the refugees for their opinion before, and thanked us for making the visit. A female

member of a drama group in Dagahaley camp said she was honored by our visit, that it had "rekindled her spirit" and that the visit was a huge boost to her morale. However, one community leader in Dagahaley said the United States should do only public affairs and humanitarian work in the camp, and leave discussions of Somali politics to the Somalis.

¶4. (SBU) Although the refugees were often unaware of the U.S. government's work through the Somalia Unit, nearly all with whom we spoke were aware of the U.S. aid to the camps, and express gratitude to us. A contact from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) told us that when the refugees were told that the hijacking of the Maersk Alabama was related to a recent temporary cut in their rations, they were disappointed and embarrassed that fellow Somalis had inflicted even more hardship on them in the camps. A Community Peace and Security Team (CPST) member in Ifo camp cited the donation, with funding from the Bureau of Populations, Refugees, and Migrants (PRM) via Lutheran World Federation, of bicycles, boots and reflective vests - one CPST member wore his reflective vest to our early morning meeting - for CPST patrols in the camp as evidence of positive U.S. involvement in the camps. Finally, several refugees acknowledged that the United States accepts the largest number of Dadaab refugees on a yearly basis.

U.S. Caused This

¶5. (SBU) Many refugees with whom we spoke claimed that the U.S. government was behind much of the turmoil that has plagued Somalia

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for the past 18 years. In one especially frank exchange, a community action leader in Ifo camp claimed Somalis would not be fighting were it not for the United States and other outside parties perpetuating the conflict in Somalia. Continuing, he said that the United States in recent years "left no stone unturned to destroy Somalia" and claimed some Somali males felt compelled to shave their beards to avoid being labeled as terrorists.

U.S. Can Fix This

¶6. (SBU) While many of the refugees blamed the U.S. government for the troubles of Somalis, many stated that they believed the United States could, given sufficient political will, neutralize the extremist elements who continue to cause political instability in the country. Another community leader in Ifo camp said the United States could expel the troublemakers, "just like in Bosnia." The leader of a youth empowerment initiative in Ifo camp told us refugees' views on acceptable U.S. interventions in Somalia ranged from invasion and re-colonization to a complete disengagement, leaving Somalis to fend for themselves. A Dagahaley community leader believed the United States had destroyed Somalia, but that the role of the world's remaining superpower was "not only to destroy, but rebuild."

Comment

¶7. (SBU) Septel will review several opportunities for further public diplomacy engagement with this large population of Somalis. The simple act of making ourselves available to several groups of these refugees over three days afforded us significant inroads. Further, concerted engagement with this population will likely allow us to repair some misconceptions about U.S. policy toward Somalia, and the fact that the audience is in regular contact with Somalis inside Somalia will give any public diplomacy engagement an exponential impact. End comment.

RANNEBERGER